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ABSTRACT

Community-based prevention-oriented approaches that provide basic supports to families are needed to address rising rates of violence, child abuse, and other socially disruptive behavior. Weak families, weak neighborhoods, and weak economies are mutually reinforcing and lead to negative behaviors by youth and others. In proposing a community change strategy, a wildlife analogy of survival in marginal environments is used. The differences (survival of civilization versus preservation of a species or ecological system, and humans' ability to adapt) and similarities (life at the margins and multiple environmental stressors) are explained. A community evaluation study in New York showed that the highest (most urban) and lowest (most rural) population densities exhibited the highest statistical averages on stress indicators. However, some towns with high poverty levels ranked low on other stressors. The study findings reinforced the idea that the number of different risk factors a child faces can be more important than the level of any one type of risk. Key elements for a stable community include safety and security, economic opportunity, adequate and affordable housing, access to health care, good child care, integrated schools, after-school activities, constructive opportunities for youth, and support networks for parents. A community restoration plan, analogous to one used in wildlife preservation, is recommended. A sidebar describes a five-step environmental assessment tool. (SAS)

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Executive Summary: Remediation vs. Prevention

Studies indicate that our response to socially disruptive behavior in the U.S. has concentrated too much on trying to patch up individual families and children after damage has occurred, rather than working to prevent damage in the first place. This research advises that individual and community well-being are inextricably linked. Neighborhood environment influences social behavior. Environmental analysis should be applied to neighborhoods where habitat destruction, in the form of community deterioration, is becoming an increasing threat. Since people build communities, people can choose to change them in ways that prevent child endangerment.

Violence is Cause for Alarm

Since 1980 the number of reported cases of child abuse and neglect in the U.S. has almost tripled, going from 1.1 million to nearly three million in 1992. (US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect,1993). The teen unmarried birth rate jumped by 62% during the same period (Children's Defense Fund, 1995). The number of youth involved in gangs doubled between 1980 and 1990. The suicide rate among adolescents roughly tripled between the 1960's and 1980's, while the murder rate for teenage boys aged 15-19 more than doubled between 1985 and 1991 (National Commission on Children, 1991).

These changes constitute nothing less than an alarm; they indicate that an increasing number of families are somehow failing at their main task, raising their children. National advisory groups have recommended a strong prevention-oriented approach with emphasis on basic supports to families before they get into crisis.

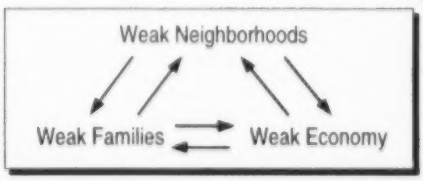
Neighborhoods Matter

There is growing interest in the effects of neighborhood and community on families and parenting. In both rural and urban areas, scholars have noticed the negative effect of marginal neighborhoods -- communities with inadequate economic and social supports -- on families and children. This has led to a call for community development as a primary prevention effort to identify and change community conditions which weaken families and lead youth and others into negative behaviors.

Vicious Cycle Leads to Decline in Both Rural & Urban Communities

It is fair to ask whether the problems among children and youth are the result of disintegration of community, or whether they are in fact responsible for the disintegration of community, or whether both types of deterioration result from something else, such as a weakening of the family, or the economy. The fundamental issue is that these negative trends reinforce each other. Weak families, weak neighborhoods, and weak economies are mutually reinforcing. Once this pernicious cycle gets going it takes on a life of its own that becomes difficult to reverse.

When economic loss occurs in the community, people with better alternatives leave, and the availability of people who can provide stability and leadership declines. The community social structure begins to unravel as churches, clubs, organizations and services weaken or close down. Legitimate opportunities to make a living decrease; crime increases. People who move into the community come primarily in search of cheap housing. While there are variations, the main elements of this cycle have been documented in both rural and urban settings.



The Wildlife Analogy

The destruction of habitat for wildlife has raised critical concerns about the ability of some wildlife species to survive in marginal environments. Should similar concerns be raised about the ability of families and children to flourish in marginal urban and rural neighborhoods? What can we learn from the wildlife studies as we think about the importance of habitat for families and children?

Differences

Survival of civilization

Whereas wildlife conservation efforts focus on preservation of a species or ecological system, the chief concern for humans is preservation of civilization, rather than extinction of the species. Are our family and community environments producing offspring capable of sustaining our critical institutions? Will the children growing up today and those who follow be able to maintain and transmit the rules of conduct, respect, morality and civility that make our communities livable? Will they be able to operate both the machines and the social institutions we have created? Will they be able to raise children with the creativity and skills to confront complex crises and challenges?

Ability to adapt

The ability of humans to adapt to different environments and to literally create and alter environments to meet our needs, is unique in nature, and tends to reduce awareness of the effects of the natural environment. But having the ability to change or modify our own habitat imposes responsibilities and obligations not shared by other species. We have created the villages, cities and suburbs in which our species lives. We must therefore take responsibility for changing them if they have become unsuitable environments for raising our children.

Similarities

Life at the margins

An aspect of wildlife ecological studies with some relevance for human communities may be the concept of "life at the margins." Environmental limitations usually affect the most vulnerable first. Biologists have noted that the quality of life drops rapidly at the edge of a species' habitat. Spotted owls living outside the forest fail to nest and cannot produce offspring. Could marginal environments also frustrate people's ability to form stable families?

The ability to maintain stable relationships and communities is critical for the long nurturance that human offspring require. Where many children go unsupervised or uncared for, youths often join gangs to meet basic needs that families and community institutions provide elsewhere. While it is common to lay responsibility for raising children on parents, in order to thrive in our civilization, children need more than parents alone can provide.

Multiple Environmental Stressors Most Damaging to Children and Families

Many studies were reviewed to identify common community factors which are stressors for child well-being. The number of different risk factors a child faces can be more important than the level of any given type of risk. This suggests that it is not enough for a community to remove just one stressor or problem; the community must assess itself as a total environment and work to minimize conditions that produce major stresses for families and children.

> The number of different risk factors a child faces can be more important than the level of any one type of risk.

The Annie Casey Foundation recognizes that multiple stressors create statistically marginal communities. According to the ***Kids Count Data Book,*** "Severely Distressed Neighborhoods" demonstrate 4 out of 5 of the following characteristics at a rate one standard deviation above the national average:

- High poverty rate (above 27.5%)
- High % female headed families (above 39.6%)
- High % high school dropouts (above 23.3%)
- High % males unattached to the labor force (above 46.5%)
- High % families receiving public assistance (above 17.0%)

Results of New York Research

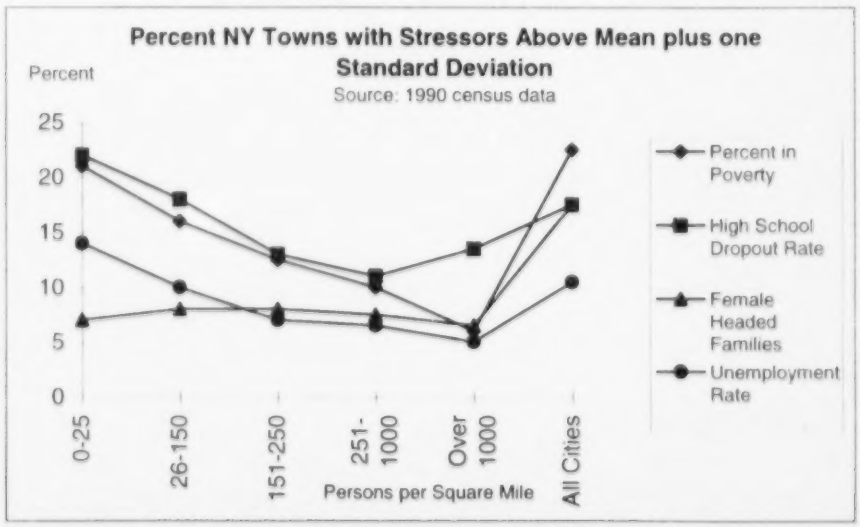
Modeled after ***Kids Count,*** a "community scale" was developed to evaluate local communities in New York State. Population density was used as a control variable to distinguish between urban, suburban and rural settings and convey more about the surroundings for children than total population. This method enabled comparison of child well-being measures among communities with similar characteristics.

The highest (most urban) and lowest (most rural) density towns exhibited the highest statistical averages on stress indicators. (See graph). This is not surprising given the similarities between isolated rural and depressed inner city neighborhoods on a number of socio-economic measures.

However, at the individual community level, some towns with high poverty levels ranked low on other stressors. This is important in light of other studies showing that poverty (in the absence of other risk factors) has little adverse impact on child development at the individual level (Gabarino, 1995).

Stable Communities: Key Elements

1. Safety and security for both children and families. Optimal child development is not possible if fear and survival needs are paramount. If it is dangerous to play outside or at school, children's social, intellectual and emotional development will be severely restricted. (Garbarino, 1995)



2. Economic opportunity. Parents need to be able to provide the basics for their families. Lack of jobs, extremely low wages and lack of financing for business ventures make it difficult for parents to provide for children's basic needs.

3. Adequate and affordable housing. Insufficient and inadequate housing can result in homelessness, health problems for children and hunger, as high rents often leave little money for other basics. Inability to pay rent often results in forced moves. Mobility is associated with poor school performance, and increases the likelihood of dropping out.

4. Access to health care. Lack of health care can have tragic long-term effects on children. Simple ear infections in toddlers can lead to loss of hearing if not treated. Inadequate pre-natal care can result in unnecessary premature births and long term problems for the child and society.

5. Good child care. Working parents require good child care. If young children are to develop their potential, this care must be interactive, with plenty of verbal stimulation and activity supervised by caring adults.

6. Community integrated schools. Positive school morale is especially important in severely distressed neighborhoods where parenting is weak and schools are called upon to perform parenting functions for some children. In communities which have lost major industries and other institutions, schools that involve parents and others in an open fashion have the potential to become the center of community life.

7. After school activities. Providing constructive after-school activities is a challenge for communities but helps avoid the anti-social and destructive behaviors which can result from leaving children unsupervised and isolated for long periods.

8. Constructive opportunities for youth. Youth need positive role models who can influence them positively and they need creative activities which allow them to explore their potential. Community opportunities will play an important role in successful transitions from school to work and from childhood to adulthood.

9. Support networks for parents. In healthy communities most families develop support networks naturally through friends, work associates, neighbors, and other contacts made through churches, social and recreational activities. Community organizations can help provide child rearing information and a place for educational and social activities for parents.

Five Step Environmental Assessment Tool

1. ***Assessment of child well being***: How are the community's children faring at key points in their lives? How does their well being compare statistically with national and state averages as reported in ***Kids Count?*** Does the community fall within the "severely distressed" category?

2. ***Comparison with averages for communities of similar population density:*** Are any of the four measures higher than the mean plus one standard deviation figures presented above for this community's population density? Does it meet the four out of five high risk criterion?

3. ***Longitudinal assessment:*** How have measures of child well-being changed over time? What is improving and what is getting worse?

4. ***Comparison with community standard of adequacy:*** Do the child well being figures coincide with what the community itself feels is acceptable? What are community expectations for each category in order to maintain its quality of life?

5. ***Assessment of community institutions and assets:*** What institutions are weak or lacking in areas where well-being scores indicate problems? Are there untapped or unrecognized strengths or resources in the community? How adequate is each of these key elements:

	1	2	3	4
a. Safety, security for children and families				
b. Economic opportunity				
c. Adequate and affordable housing				
d. Access to health care				
e. Good child care				
f. Community integrated schools				
g. After school activities for youth				
h. Constructive opportunities for youth				
i. Support networks for parents				

Key: 1. Serious problem 2. Less than adequate 3. Adequate 4. More than adequate

A Community Restoration Plan

A restoration plan is a tool used in wildlife preservation to design a strategy for removing a species from the "endangered" list. Such a plan could be developed to remove a neighborhood from the "severely distressed" category, or from any serious at risk category. Rather than focusing on the remediation of individuals, a local government or consortium could find ways to strengthen the community as a whole. We need to place as much, or more importance on the environments of our children as we do on the environments of wildlife.

Communities may want to consider a comprehensive environmental evaluation such as the five step assessment tool shown. (See box). The first three steps can be accomplished utilizing available data bases. The last two require getting out and talking with people, finding out about the community's weaknesses and strengths from the perspective of families and children. Broad based discussions with community groups, schools, churches and child serving agencies, as well as neighborhood organizations must also occur. Neighborhood residents must be key participants in the action research and community development process.

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Teen Assessment Project

Tapping into teens' thoughts and finding out how they fare in their communities -- that's the goal of TAP, the Teen Assessment Project. In many counties in NYS, Cornell Cooperative Extension, school districts, and community groups have collaborated to survey teens' concerns and behaviors. Interactive community-based study produces indicators of neighborhood stressors and risks. Contextual information is then available for communities to fine tune and target resources.

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